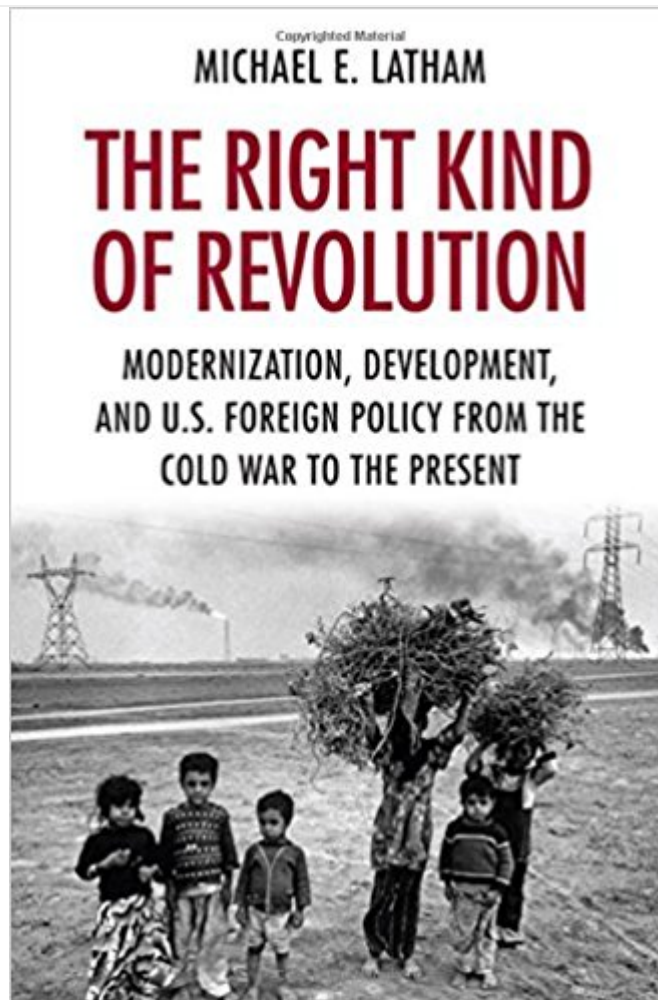


# {essays in history}

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## The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present.* Michael Latham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). Pp 256. Hardcover, \$69.95. Paperback, \$22.95.

Over the past decade the United States government has spent trillions of dollars in overseas actions. American military officials, diplomats, and representatives of non-governmental organizations have engaged in providing security, clean water, and other daily needs for millions. The term nation-building has become commonplace in discussions concerning American foreign policy. That reality makes it imperative that historians attempt to understand the long and complicated history of American attempts to alter societies around the world. In *The Right Kind of Revolution*, historian Michael Latham traces United States efforts at modernization and development from the Cold War to the present.

This work follows up the author's first book, *Modernization as Ideology*, which exclusively covered Kennedy era programs that included the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam.<sup>[1]</sup> Expanding on some similar themes, *The Right Kind of Revolution* broadens both the geographic and conceptual scope while greatly contributing to the burgeoning literature on modernization.<sup>[2]</sup> Reiterating his contention that modernization theory functioned as an ideology, Latham declares that "the concept of modernization embodied a long-standing conviction that the United States could fundamentally direct and accelerate the historical course of the postcolonial world" (3). The main thesis of this work is that while American policymakers desired to direct positive change around the world, they often failed. Holding onto a stringent belief that U.S. ingenuity and intervention could, and would succeed, leaders employed policies that often ignored "the realities of history, culture, and local context" (8). Latham hopes this work will help better understand those failings, while stimulating "the pursuit of better alternatives" (9).

Beginning with a discussion on the origins of modernization theory in American thought, Latham posits that enlightenment ideas on social progress coupled with a conviction that the American experiment needed to be replicated led the United States to embark on developmental projects. In Latham's view, late nineteenth century and early twentieth century U.S. imperial ventures in the Philippines and Latin America were precursors to more comprehensive programs of American development.

It was not until the 1940s and emergence of the Cold War that modernization took on a global scale. As it became clear that the most contested terrains of the Cold War would be in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, modernization appeared to be an effective tool to combat communist aspirations. The pace in which development was believed to occur is central to understanding the American fixation on modernization. The process was said to undergo several stages, with perhaps the most important being the "take-off" stage, which would witness dynamic economic growth. Being able to quickly accomplish development would stymie communist desires while not tying down American resources for extended periods of time.

Following the first two chapters, which focused on the origins of modernization theory and the rise of a global Cold War, Latham delves into particular case studies of American attempts at modernization and development in the Third World. He first discusses U.S. relations with India's *Jawaharlal* Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Nasser, and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. All three leaders sought to modernize their respective nations, but on their own terms. Latham articulately posits that "while Nehru, Nasser, and Nkrumah agreed with U.S. policymakers on the value of national development planning to promote economic growth and raise living standards, serious conflicts ultimately emerged over both the *forms* and the *purposes* of development" (89). Regarding the purpose, nationalist leaders yearned for economic independence and non-alignment in the Cold War, while American leaders wanted to demonstrate western strength *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union.

The second set of case studies includes American policies towards Guatemala, Iran, and South Vietnam. These countries are included to illustrate that while democracy promotion was an integral part of modernization, the desire for security and stability often triumphed. In

each case, the United States backed repressive governments in the hopes that they could produce quick economic growth. South Vietnam and Iran are intriguing studies. South Vietnam demonstrated what the consequences of failed modernization could be. When U.S. policies did not produce rapid growth, and conditions in Vietnam deteriorated to the point that a communist victory seemed likely, American forces intervened on a large-scale. In Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi brought stability and economic growth, though mostly for those in the upper echelons of Iranian society. The overthrow of Pahlavi in 1979 illustrated the futility and short-sightedness of American policy. Latham argues that failures in Vietnam and Iran left a gaping wound, he writes that “where liberal defenders had described modernization as a way to comprehend the course of universal social change, promote development, and ensure security, critics on both the left and the right would attack its intellectual fallacies as well as its longer-run effects” (153).

While reaching its zenith in the mid-1960s, a decade later modernization was completely reconfigured. Latham views this as occurring due to the broader failures of American liberalism and the rise of neoliberal economic thought. Modernization always held a firm connection to liberal ideas on the ability of government to produce positive change. The American crises of the early 1970s, both foreign and domestic, led many to question the central tenets of post-war liberal thought. Moreover, neoliberal “arguments about the virtues of market capitalism ultimately triumphed in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (158). In Latham’s argument, during the 1980s, rather than focusing on nation-building and large-scale development programs, the United States hoped to blend local military forces with neoliberal ideologies to counter communist advances. A peculiar omission from this discussion on the U.S. embrace of military leaders is Chile and *Augusto* Pinochet. A repressive military ruler, Pinochet embraced neoliberal economics. It would seem that U.S. support of Pinochet’s Chile would fit into Latham’s framework, yet the country or its leader never receives mention.

The final chapter of this work deals with more contemporary issues, which may make some historians cringe, though Latham handles the material in an impressive manner. Although modernization and development decreased as viable policy options during the 1970s, the recent past has witnessed their resurgence. Latham writes that “in the

post-Cold War era, and especially after September 11, 2001, many of modernization's essential elements rose dramatically from the grave" (187). While conceding that nation-building is once again on the rise, Latham laments American policymakers and their continued simplistic assumptions on the United States' ability to accelerate the development process in other nations. Instead, he argues in favor of policies that empower locals and holds people accountable. He contends that "the process will be a long and difficult one, marked less by 'take-offs' than by incremental gains and periodic setbacks" (216).

Ultimately, Michael Latham has produced a work that should be applauded. Incorporating political, diplomatic, and intellectual histories makes this book appealing to many. His argument that modernization and development were central tools of American foreign policy during the Cold War is accurate. Moreover, his interpretation that American policymakers often understood little about the complex realities that existed in the Third World is sound, while at the same time alarming. All in all, this is an impressive work that will not only benefit students, but also policymakers in Washington.

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[1] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: Social Science and "Nation-Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2] Other prominent works include: Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).



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